

Ukraine Assassinates Top Russian General in Moscow



A body lies at the place where Lt. General Igor Kirillov, the head of Russia's Nuclear, Biological, and Chemical Defense Forces was killed in Moscow, Dec. 17, 2024.

MOSCOW (Reuters) -- A top Russian general accused by Ukraine of being responsible for the use of chemical weapons against Ukrainian troops was assassinated in Moscow by Ukraine's SBU intelligence service on Tuesday morning in the most high-profile killing of its kind.

Lieutenant General Igor Kirillov, who was chief of Russia's Nuclear, Biological and Chemical Protection Troops, was killed outside an apartment building along with his assistant when a bomb hidden in an electric scooter went off, Russia's Investigative Committee, which probes serious crimes, said.

An SBU source confirmed to Reuters that the Ukrainian intelligence

agency had been behind the hit. "The liquidation of the chief of the radiation and chemical protection troops of the Russian Federation is the work of the SBU," the source said.

The source said that a scooter containing explosives was detonated, killing both Kirillov and his aide, as they stepped out of a building on Ryazansky Prospekt in Moscow.

Unverified video footage of the attack circulating on social media showed two men exiting the building to get into a car followed by a large explosion as the two men remained on the pavement.

Kirillov, 54, is the most senior Russian military officer to be assassinated inside Russia by Ukraine and his

murder is likely to prompt the Russian authorities to review security protocols for the army's top brass and to find a way to avenge his killing.

Former president Dmitry Medvedev, now a senior Russian security official, was cited by the state RIA news agency as saying that Ukraine's military and political leadership now faced imminent revenge for Kirillov's murder.

Moscow holds Ukraine responsible for a string of high-profile assassinations on its soil designed to weaken morale and punish those Kyiv regards guilty of war crimes. Ukraine, which says Russia's war against it poses an existential threat to the Ukrainian state, has made clear it regards such targeted killings as a legitimate tool.

Photographs and video from the scene showed a shattered entrance to an apartment building with bomb-blackened bricks and the doors hanging off their hinges and what looked like two bodies lying beneath black plastic sheets on the snow.

Maria Zakharova, a spokeswoman for Russia's Foreign Ministry, paid tribute to Kirillov, saying he had worked "fearlessly" for "the Motherland" to expose what she said were the West's chemical weapons-related and other crimes and what Moscow says were cover-ups in Syria and elsewhere.

Teenage Girl Shoots Dead Two, Injures Six at Wisconsin School



Police walk outside the Abundant Life Christian School following a shooting, Dec. 16, 2024 in Madison, Wis.

WISCONSIN (Reuters) -- A 15-year-old girl opened fire in a Wisconsin school classroom on Monday, fatally shooting a fellow student and a teacher and wounding six other people before killing herself with the handgun, police said.

The shooting took place in a mixed-grade study hall shortly before 11 a.m. (1700 GMT) at the Abundant Life Christian School, which has 420 students from pre-kindergarten through 12th grade.

The shooter was a student at the school, identified by police as Natalie Rupunow, who also went by the name Samantha.

A second-grade student, who

would generally be 7 or 8 years old, called 911 to report the shooting at the school, Madison Police Chief Shon Barnes told a press conference.

"Let that soak in for a minute," Barnes said.

The two shot dead were a teenage student and a teacher, Barnes said without identifying the victims.

Two wounded students were in critical condition with life-threatening injuries, while another teacher and three other students were wounded and expected to survive.

School shootings have been a macabre routine in the United States, with 322 of them this year, according to the K-12 School Shooting Database website.

That is the second highest total of any year since 1966, according to that database - topped only by last year's total of 349 such shootings.

Monday's rampage was a rarity in that it was carried about by a girl. Only about 3% of all U.S. mass shootings perpetrated by females, studies show.

There was as yet no known motive for the violence.

Asked how she got the gun, Barnes said, "Good question. How does any 15-year-old get ahold of a gun?"

At a previous press conference, Barnes lamented how the tragedy would affect Madison, the capital of Wisconsin with a population of about 270,000.

"Every child, every person in that building, is a victim, and will be a victim forever. These types of trauma don't just go away," Barnes said.

Gun control and school safety have become major political and social issues in the U.S. where the number of school shootings has jumped in recent years.

The gun violence epidemic has afflicted public and private schools alike in urban, suburban and rural communities.

The Wisconsin shooting took place 12 years and two days after one of the most notorious school shootings in U.S. history: the massacre at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut. A 20-year-old man armed with a semi-automatic rifle killed 20 school children plus six adults who worked at the school.

Embassy Blasts 'Twisted Mentality Towards China' in UK

LONDON (Guardian) -- The Chinese embassy in London has accused some UK parliamentarians of having a "twisted mentality towards China", after the identity of a businessman accused of being a spy was revealed on Monday.

A Chinese embassy spokesperson said on Tuesday that "anti-China clamors" were an attempt to "smear China, target against the Chinese community in the UK and undermine normal personnel exchanges between China and the UK".

On Monday, the high court in London lifted an anonymity order that had been in place in the case of a Chinese businessman and confidant of Prince Andrew who is accused of being a Chinese spy.

The man at the heart of the row, Yang Tengbo, had asked for the court to lift the anonymity order so that he could challenge what he describes as "ill-founded" claims against him.

Several MPs had been considering

using their parliamentary privilege to name Yang before the anonymity order was lifted. Iain Duncan Smith, a former Conservative party leader and strong critic of the Chinese government, said that the allegations surrounding Yang were "the tip of the iceberg" of Chinese influence in the UK.

Yang was excluded from the UK in 2023 by the then home secretary, Suella Braverman, on the grounds that it was "conducive to the public good". For the past two decades Yang has divided his life between the UK and China, and in 2013 he had been granted indefinite leave to remain in the UK.

Yang is accused of being a member of the united front work department, the arm of the Chinese Communist party (CCP) responsible for overseas influence. He denies being a Chinese spy.

In a statement, Yang said he was a victim of souring UK-China re-

lations. "The political climate has changed and unfortunately I have fallen victim to this. When relations are good and Chinese investment is sought, I am welcome in the UK. When relations sour, an anti-China stance is taken and I am excluded." He said he was planning to appeal against the decision to exclude him from the UK.

The Chinese embassy spokesperson said: "The united front led by the [CCP] endeavors to bring together various political parties and people from all walks of life, ethnic groups and organizations to promote cooperation between the [CCP] and people who are not members of it and promote people-to-people exchanges and friendship with other countries.

"This is above board and beyond reproach. Though some UK politicians attempted to demonize China's united front work, they are doomed to fail."

Trump: Letting Ukraine Fire Long-Range U.S. Missiles 'Stupid'



President-elect Donald Trump arrives for a news conference at Mar-a-Lago in Palm Beach, Florida on Dec. 16, 2024.

PALM BEACH, Fla. (AP) — President-elect Donald Trump on Monday suggested that he may reverse President Joe Biden's recent decision to allow Ukrainian forces to use American long-range weapons to strike deeper into Russian territory.

Trump called the decision made by Biden last month "stupid." He also expressed anger that his incoming administration was not consulted before Biden made the move. With the loosening of the restrictions, Biden gave Ukraine long-sought permission to use the Army Tactical Missile System provided by the U.S. to strike Russian positions hundreds miles from its border.

Trump's withering criticism of the Biden administration's move comes as the Democratic administration aims to push every last dollar already designated for Ukraine out the door to help repel Russia before Trump takes office on Jan. 20, with future aid uncertain.

Asked if he would consider reversing the Biden administration decision, Trump responded: "I might. I think it was a very stupid thing to do."

Trump's relationship with Russian leader Vladimir Putin has been scrutinized since his 2016 campaign for president, when he called on Russia to find and make public missing emails deleted by Hillary Clinton, his Democratic op-

ponent. Trump publicly sided with Putin over U.S. intelligence officials on whether Russia had interfered in the 2016 election to help him, and Trump has praised the Russian leader and even called him "pretty smart" for invading Ukraine.

Vice President-elect JD Vance has said that while the U.S. has differences with Russia, it was counterproductive to approach Moscow as an enemy.

Trump on Monday reiterated his call on both Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky and Russian President Vladimir Putin to negotiate an end to the war, calling the death and despair caused by the conflict "carnage."

But the situation on the ground in Ukraine continues to remain complicated as both sides wrestle for a battlefield advantage that will give them leverage in any negotiations to end the nearly three-year war.

The Pentagon last week unveiled U.S. intelligence that predicts Russia could again launch its lethal new intermediate-range ballistic missile against Ukraine soon.

Putin deployed the missile for the first time last month days after Biden loosened the restrictions on Ukraine. Putin warned the West that Russia's next use could be against Ukraine's NATO allies who allowed Kyiv to use their longer-range missiles to strike inside Russia.

France's Poorest Overseas Territory Devastated by Cyclone



This satellite image shows damage of College de Kwale on the French Territory of Mayotte in the Indian Ocean after Cyclone Chido, Dec. 16, 2024.

PARIS/MORONI (Reuters) -- Authorities in Mayotte were racing on Tuesday to stop hunger, disease and lawlessness from spreading in the French overseas territory after the weekend's devastating cyclone, while Mozambique reported dozens of deaths from the storm.

Hundreds or even thousands could be dead in Mayotte, which took the strongest hit from Cyclone Chido, French officials have said. The storm laid waste to large parts of the archipelago off east Africa, France's poorest overseas territory, before striking continental Africa.

With many parts of Mayotte still inaccessible and some victims buried before their deaths could be officially counted, it may take days to discover the full extent of the destruction.

So far, 22 deaths and more than 1,400 injuries have been confirmed, Ambdilwaedou Soumaila, the mayor of the capital Mamoudzou, told Radio France Internationale on Tuesday morning.

"The priority today is water and food," Soumaila said. "There are people who have unfortunately died where the bodies are starting to decompose that can create a sanitary problem."

"We don't have electricity. When night falls, there are people who take advantage of that situation."

France's interior ministry announced that a curfew would go into effect on Tuesday night from 10 p.m. to 4 a.m. local time.

Rescue workers have been searching for survivors amid the debris of shantytowns bowled over by 200 kph (124 mph) winds.

Chido was the strongest storm to strike Mayotte in more than 90 years, French weather service Meteo France said. In Mozambique, it killed at least 34 people, officials said on Tuesday. Another seven died in Malawi.

Drone footage from Mozambique's Cabo Delgado province, already experiencing a humanitarian crisis due to an Islamist insurgency, showed razed thatched-roof houses near the beach and personal belongings scattered under the few palm trees still standing.

French President Emmanuel Macron said after an emergency cabinet meeting on Monday that he would visit Mayotte in the coming days, as the disaster quickly fuelled a political back-and-forth about immigration, the environment and France's treatment of its overseas territories.

Mayotte has been grappling with unrest in recent years, with many residents angry at illegal immigration and inflation.

More than three-quarters of its roughly 321,000 people live in relative poverty, and about one-third are estimated to be undocumented migrants, most from nearby Comoros and Madagascar.

Left-wing politicians have pointed the finger at what they say is the government's neglect of Mayotte and failure to prepare for natural disasters linked to climate change.

News in Brief

NEW YORK (Reuters) -- Donald Trump on Monday lost a bid to overturn his criminal conviction stemming from hush money paid to a porn star in light of the U.S. Supreme Court's July ruling recognizing immunity from prosecution for a president's official acts. Justice Juan Merchan's denial of Trump's motion to dismiss the New York state case forecloses one avenue for the Republican president-elect to enter the White House on Jan. 20 for his second four-year term without the stain of a criminal conviction. The case stemmed from a \$130,000 payment that Trump's former lawyer Michael Cohen made to adult film actor Stormy Daniels. The payment was for her silence before the 2016 election about a sexual encounter she has said she had a decade earlier with Trump, who denies it. The hush money case was the only one of four sets of criminal charges brought against Trump in 2023 to reach trial.

WASHINGTON (Reuters) -- The U.S. Senate on Monday voted overwhelmingly to advance an \$895 billion bill setting policy for the Pentagon toward passage as soon as Tuesday, which would send it to the White House for President Joe Biden to sign into law. The tally was 83 to 12 in favor of advancing the National Defense Authorization Act, or NDAA, to a vote on final passage, comfortably over the 60 needed in the 100-member Senate. This year's NDAA authorizes a record \$895 billion in annual military spending, covering provisions on purchases of military equipment and boosting competitiveness with archrivals including China and Russia. The 1,800-page bill also focuses on improving the quality of life for the U.S. military. It authorizes a 14.5% pay increase for the lowest-ranking troops, and 4.5% for the rest of the force, higher than usual. It also authorizes the construction of military housing, schools and childcare centers.

WELLINGTON, New Zealand (AP) -- A powerful magnitude 7.3 earthquake struck just off the coast of Vanuatu on Tuesday, causing widespread destruction in the South Pacific island nation as the injured began arriving at a hospital and unconfirmed reports of casualties emerged. A tsunami warning was called off less than two hours after the quake. With communications still down hours later and official information scarce, witness accounts of casualties began to surface on social media and through patchy phone calls. The earthquake happened at just before 1 p.m. at a depth of 57 kilometers (35 miles) and was centered 30 kilometers west of Port Vila, the largest city in Vanuatu -- a group of 80 islands that is home to about 330,000 people. It was followed by a magnitude 5.5 aftershock near the same location, with tremors continuing throughout the afternoon and evening. It was not immediately clear how much damage was caused as phone lines and government websites remained down.

SEOUL (Reuters) -- South Korean investigators probing President Yoon Suk Yeol's short-lived martial law declaration failed to gain entry to his office to seek evidence on Tuesday after presidential office security staff denied them entry, Yonhap news agency reported. Yoon was impeached on Saturday over his martial law decree and suspended from his presidential duties. Yonhap said that investigators looking for evidence about the legality of Yoon's martial law decision waited for about seven hours to be let in, but the presidential office security service denied them entry. This would be the second time authorities have tried and failed to raid the presidential office over the declaration of martial law that was reversed within hours after a standoff with parliament. An attempt on Dec. 11 ended without entry, but the presidential office voluntarily submitted some data.

WASHINGTON (AP) -- At a time of heightened political division, Americans' confidence in their country's judicial system and courts dropped to a record low of 35% this year, according to a new Gallup poll. The United States saw a sharp drop of 24 percentage points over the last four years, setting the country apart from other wealthy nations where most people on average still express trust in their systems. The results come after a tumultuous period that included the indictment of former President Donald Trump and the subsequent withdrawal of federal charges, and his attacks on the integrity of the judicial system. The drop wasn't limited to one end of the political spectrum. Confidence dropped among people who disapproved of the country's leadership during Joe Biden's presidency and among those who approved, according to Gallup. The respondents weren't asked about their party affiliations.

BERLIN (Reuters) -- Germany's main political parties presented their competing plans on Tuesday for lifting Europe's largest economy out of the doldrums as campaigning kicked off for a snap election on Feb. 23. The election, triggered after Social Democrat Chancellor Olaf Scholz's three-party coalition collapsed last month amid arguments over debt and then lost a parliamentary vote of confidence on Monday, comes at a testing time for Germany. Its economy is set to shrink for a second straight year, industrial giants like Volkswagen face an existential threat from foreign rivals and political attitudes are hardening towards migrants. Data from the Ifo institute also delivered a sharp reminder of Germany's woes on Tuesday, showing that business morale worsened more than expected in December.